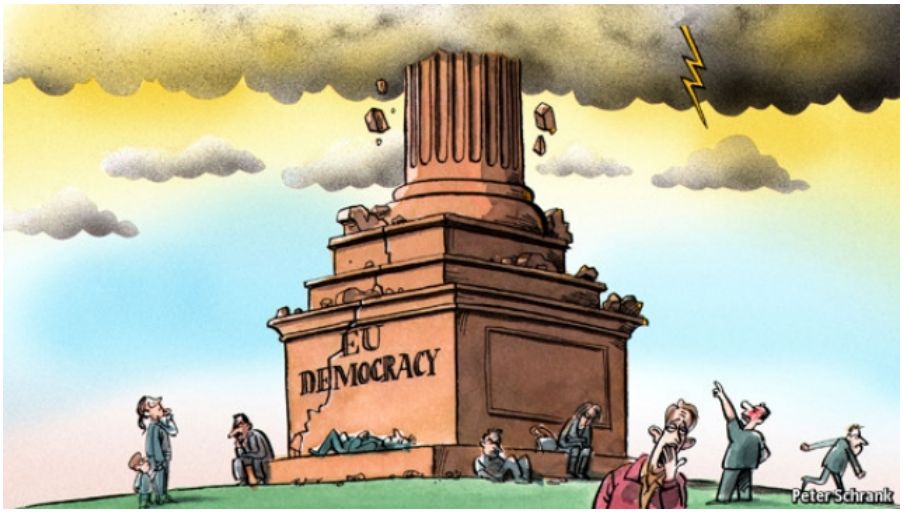
Charlemagne

A flawed temple

The loss of legitimacy may now be the biggest threat to the European project



Print edition | Europe ›

Mar 16th 2013

EUROPEAN leaders may have saved the euro (for the time being, at least), but they are fast losing Europe's citizens. Eurobarometer polls show that voters are ever more disenchanted with European bodies. Plainly, the fight against budget deficits is widening Europe's other deficit: the democratic one.

The EU boasts of being a union of democracies. But its crisis of legitimacy is intensifying as it delves more deeply into national policies, especially in the euro zone. One problem is the evisceration of national politics: whatever citizens may vote for, southerners end up with more austerity and northerners must pay for more bail-outs. Another is that the void is not being filled by a credible European-level democracy. Ancient Greeks could more readily seek the intercession of Olympian gods than today's citizens can hope to change policy in Brussels. A separate but related problem is that the EU struggles to maintain democratic norms among its members, as in Hungary.

Eurocrats' reply to these conundrums is a flawed mantra: that "more Europe" must always be matched by "more European Parliament". Directly elected since 1979, MEPs have gained many powers. This week they rejected European leaders' arduously negotiated budget compromise. Yet falling turnouts for European elections suggest they have not won voters' respect.

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Now the parliament's big political "families" want each to name a champion for next year's European election who, if successful, would become the nominee for the next president of the European Commission, the EU's civil service. This week it formally blessed the idea with an unusual (non-binding) "recommendation". The aim is to create a less opaque European system that mimics national politics. Having flesh-and-blood politicians slug it out over, say, the balance between austerity and growth is supposed to kindle the passion for pan-European politics.

That said, television ratings may not be much improved by a clash of unknowns arguing in a foreign language (probably English). And the focus on European candidates may only highlight the splits between the families' constituent national parties—for instance the British Labour Party and the French socialists.

A clearer democratic mandate for the president of the European Commission (some would hold direct elections for the job) would shift the EU, a hybrid of a UN-style international organisation and a US-style federal system, closer to the American model. Under the current system, national leaders typically choose a commission president from among their caste of current or former peers, then seek approval from MEPs. Now the parliament would present its choice for leaders to rubber-stamp.

The experiment would change the pool of candidates. Few sitting prime ministers will dare be seen ignoring national affairs to campaign in Europe. The *papabili* include Donald Tusk of Poland, Helle Thorning-Schmidt of Denmark, Enda Kenny of Ireland and, now less likely, Mario Monti of Italy.

The new selection method would favour EU insiders: Martin Schulz, president of the European Parliament (a German Social Democrat), Guy Verhofstadt (a Belgian who leads the parliament's liberals) and Viviane Reding (the justice commissioner, a Christian Democrat from Luxembourg, who pushed through the recommendation). The current president, José Manuel Barroso, has not ruled out seeking an improbable third term.

A deeper worry is that a more overtly political president would damage the non-partisan role of the commission, which claims to act on behalf of large and small states alike, regardless of political colour. Some think that any future president would still be bound by the ethos of consensus. Nevertheless, the commission may one day have to spin off some important functions—eg, the enforcement of

competition rules and budget monitoring—to independent agencies, as happens in many states.

The EU's democratic credentials, and its credibility, are important when it comes to the fraught business of trying to preserve democracy in member countries. The passage of dubious constitutional amendments in Hungary is worrying. The rift in Romania last year between the president and prime minister also caused alarm. Oddly, given the EU's huge impact in democratising aspirant members, the union has few powers over the political order of countries once they join—short of the "nuclear option" of suspending voting rights.

As a form of peer pressure, the commission is planning to draw up a "scoreboard" of members' justice systems. The foreign ministers of Germany, the Netherlands, Finland and Denmark want to go further. They want the commission to monitor and enforce democratic values, backed by the threat of economic penalties. But could a politicised commission probe such matters?

A dangerous new European spirit

Finding the proper balance between national and European levels of democratic accountability will be awkward, not least because of the lack of a common European identity, or *demos*. Part of the answer lies in strengthening national parliaments' oversight of ministers' actions in the EU. And part lies in making the EU more responsive to voters' wishes. If European political groups want a bigger role, they will have to be tougher with their own; the European People's Party, the biggest family, does not question the presence of Hungary's Viktor Orban and Italy's Silvio Berlusconi in its midst.

A return to economic growth would do much to preserve the EU's legitimacy. If the recession and mass unemployment in the European periphery persist into next year, politics may become dangerously polarised. Forget about EU jobs. If Europe makes the leap towards a new *demos*—it may be one united in wanting to get rid of the euro and the bastards in Brussels.

Economist.com/blogs/charlemagne (http://www.economist.com/blogs/charlemagne)

Islamist extremism

Green glass ceilings

How Muslim clerics turn jihadist

Print edition | International › Mar 16th 2013 | BEIRUT

WHY pious and peaceable Muslims turn to ultraconservative and even violent versions of the faith is a subject of great interest for scholars and policymakers. But so far little effort has gone on studying the radicalisation of the clergy.

Now Rich Nielsen of Harvard University has examined the books, fatwas (religious rulings) and biographies of 91 modern Salafi clerics, as well as of 379 of their students and teachers. He found that the main factors behind radicalism are not poverty or the ideology of their teachers (as might be assumed) but the poor quality of their academic and educational networks.

Such contacts determined the clerics' ability to get a good job as *imam* or teacher in state institutions. In Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where most of the 91 came from, the government has long co-opted religious institutions. Those who failed to land a job were more likely to avow violence as a tool for political change.

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The figures are startling. Clerics with the best academic connections had a 2-3% chance of becoming jihadist. This rose to 50% for the badly networked.

Mr Nielsen reckons he has proved causation by controlling for other factors—eliminating the chance that those more inclined to extremism shun state jobs, for example. "It's about a glass ceiling," he says.

“Clerics who don’t get positions must compete to appeal to an audience. Jihadist views are a way of making themselves appear credible, since there is often a high cost associated with it, such as prison time.”

His research may help those seeking to stem the rise of radical preachers. Rather than spending a fortune snooping on them and then jailing them, it would be cheaper to offer them a decent job.

Saving sharks

Rays of hope

Endangered sharks and rays win a modicum of protection

Print edition | Asia ›

Mar 16th 2013 | BANGKOK

THE rise of China has brought incalculable benefits. But it is not without collateral damage. Every year around the world between 100m and 275m sharks are killed for their fins, to make a soup prized as a delicacy— which ever more people can now afford. Shark numbers are declining by an estimated 6-8% a year, and a number of species are endangered.

This week their prospects perked up a bit. Five species—the oceanic whitetip, the porbeagle and three types of hammerhead—were added to Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). The trade in them will be regulated. Also added is the manta ray, a fish valued for its feathery gill-rakers, sought after in China as an ingredient in a health tonic. Some populations are on the brink of extinction.

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The decision, taken at a CITES conference, held every two or three years, was close-run. The proposal squeaked home after a secret vote during the conference's final day, March 14th, on an attempt by Japan and China to reopen the debate. Despite intensive lobbying, the two countries failed to swing the decision.

In CITES' 40-year life, efforts to protect oceanic species have been resisted by fishing nations. Green groups such as WWF hailed this week's victory as a landmark—the first time commercially fished marine species have been listed under CITES. A group of South American countries came to the sharks' defence. With the growth of ecotourism, sharks and rays are becoming more valuable alive than dead. Many other developing countries that have seen industrial-scale fishing empty their seas backed the proposal.

China, Japan, Singapore and others objected, arguing that it is hard to identify sharks by their fins, and the trade should be treated as a fishery-management issue. China put it on the record that it thought it would be unable to control the trade, whose biggest hub is Hong Kong, where 50% of shark fins change hands.

Governments now have 18 months to comply with the new rules. The EU is offering grants to poor countries. In the long run, however, hope for the sharks probably rests on reducing demand for them. Campaigns in Singapore, for example, have induced some big supermarkets and restaurants to shun shark fins. But, as with so many other commodities, the demand that really counts comes from China.